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# THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

*A history*

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## Open to people<sup>I</sup>

In his inaugural speech as Foundation Chancellor of the OU, Geoffrey Crowther declared the new institution ‘open in many ways, but first of all to people’. The commitment to inclusivity was linked to an aspiration to aim ‘higher and wider’ than its acknowledged role as an ‘educational rescue mission’. The impacts of the OU’s strategies were significant at a societal level, but, by meeting needs for higher education, it has also fostered the realisation of individual potential within a diverse constituency: ‘There are no limits on persons.’<sup>2</sup> The ways in which OU students assess their experiences indicates both the academic impact of the OU but also of many instances of personal transformations which went far beyond the notion of rescue.

For individuals there were improvements in careers, confidence and contentment. In common with other students, OU graduates often refer to their enhanced personal efficiency and productivity.<sup>3</sup> Overall the university has, in the words of one researcher, ‘changed the lives of thousands of its students hugely for the better’.<sup>4</sup> Their journeys have been more dramatic than those of many other students because their travels involved large-scale changes in expectations and understandings. Personal accounts, reflecting on changes in their world and in themselves, reveal the impact of the OU. The narratives indicate how many students moved from a stage of uncompleted secondary education to degree level or beyond. Learning was now a matter of excitement and progress rather than misery and failure. As their own ability to make meanings became more sophisticated, OU students were better equipped to transform their own lives and recognise changes in the lives of those around them. This helped in turn to shape the university and the society in which it was embedded.

The first of the three sections in this chapter focuses on the diversity and number of OU students. Some students had not gained the entry qualifications required by other universities or had disabilities or familial or workplace commitments which prevented full-time attendance at university. Others were living abroad or in remote areas and were looking for accessible

higher education. Some were in prison. An unknown number of learners on whom the OU had an impact were not registered students but beneficiaries of the OU's policy of making many educational resources freely available. Many others learned indirectly from OU students. The university also supported former students who wanted to continue to learn together.

Although students who brought such a heterogeneous range of experiences, skills and ideas with them cannot easily be categorised, some patterns can be outlined. Many students presented their success in terms of economic gain due to individual effort. They reported feeling driven by a need to change direction or prove their scholarly credentials or capacity for focused work. They saw how their personal acquisition of new knowledge changed their lives and relationships. They frequently acknowledged that their engagement was initially determined by their peers, families and communities as well as their own expectations and experiences. A number referred to how the OU broadened their horizons, increased their confidence and, by enabling them to form communities of learners, helped them become active citizens who could benefit the wider society.

### **Fear and laughter**

One student recalled her husband's reaction when he discovered that she was studying with the OU by finding her books:

He threw them all down the rubbish chute (we live on the 7th floor). I get on well with Ted the caretaker so next morning when my husband had gone to work I went to see him and said I had to go through the bins ... there I was with big rubber gloves picking my way through everything but I got it all back and cleaned up. I can leave it at my pal's flat.

Another student nervously attended a Day School: 'They all looked a bit posh, some had briefcases ... it was OK until this man at the front asked a question. I hadn't a clue what he was asking me and I wet myself there and then and had to leave.'<sup>5</sup>

Martin Broadhurst, a construction worker from Derby, recalled his experiences of the residential element of an OU module, which was held at the University of Bath. He describes it as

the closest I was ever likely to get to living the traditional student life – minus the instant noodles, lie-ins and cheap overdraft ... The study

sessions began at 9 a.m. and ran through until 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. with occasional breaks to prevent our minds from overheating ... my tutors were incredibly personable and patient and gave valuable constructive feedback ... Just having peers there to discuss our difficulties with was a real benefit ... I was put in a study group with a great bunch of people meaning the long days were filled with a mix of insightful debate, serious hard work and full-on belly laughs ... The principle benefit of attending the residential school, for me at least, was the realisation that other students were having the same difficulties that I was having. I no longer felt alone in the world of long-distance study.<sup>6</sup>

In the second section the spotlight is on a specific element of the OU which formed an important part of its national image and pedagogic strategy – residential schools. Often held in summer on otherwise largely empty university campuses, these enabled the available resources, such as libraries and laboratories, to be utilised to offer face-to-face teaching. While the role of the residential schools has now shrunk in the face of critical assessment and the rise of alternative means of supporting learners, they retain significance for some qualifications: for example, accreditation by the British Psychological Society requires that students engage in some face-to-face learning. More generally they have informed wider understandings of the impact of the OU.

The focus in the third section shifts from particular aspects of the structures which have supported learning towards a specific group of learners whose access to resources was limited: prisoners. Even more so than many other students, prisoners often started from a position of low self-esteem, often had difficulties studying and often benefitted from personal support. Their studies provided at least some of them with a sense of release and equipped them with fresh tools with which to deal with issues of power and politics. In Ireland, through the OU, students in prison addressed overtly political concerns, notably attitudes towards the British and Irish states and towards women. This helped some of them to emerge into positions of community leadership and to promote politically stable structures.

### **‘A great variety of people’<sup>7</sup>**

Most UK universities which opened in the 1960s initially catered for a few hundred students.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, on 4 August 1970, when the first round of applications to the OU closed, 42,281 people had applied to the OU. This was more than anticipated. In the academic year (October–June) 1970/71 there were 621,000 students in higher education. Although the new Minister,

Margaret Thatcher, was said to approve of the OU, her decision not to cut to 10,000 students at the OU (a reported possibility) may have been taken because such a reduction would have saved little of the annual costs of about £3.5m.<sup>9</sup> Instead the decision was made to permit up to 25,000 people to enrol.<sup>10</sup> The number of students in the country was also expanding: by 1985, 15 per cent of young people in the UK went to university.<sup>11</sup> The OU more than kept pace with this expansion. By 2009, when it was much the largest university in the UK by student numbers, there were nearly 600 courses being offered to 150,000 undergraduates and 30,000 postgraduates.

The student numbers give only a partial insight into the scale of the university's operations. In its first year the OU sent 2.7 million mailings, including 33,000 home experiment kits. The students completed about 320,000 assignments: half of these were marked by tutors (Tutor marked assignments) while the other half were marked by computers (Computer marked assignments).<sup>12</sup> The administration of just one OU Social Sciences module involved some 22,000 applicants, nearly 8,000 enrolments, 85,000 essays which required assessment by hand, 64,000 assignments marked by computers, 24 summer schools in five different locations, 300 study centres and over 1,000 part-time tutors. The logistical difficulties of supplying a wide range of learning materials to each student is illustrated by Lee Taylor, who recalled that 'we had to scour London trying to find cardboard boxes of a suitable size for sheep's brains. Eventually we found a place where I purchased something like 500 boxes, which said 'Chanel No 5' on them.'<sup>13</sup> Early accounts of the OU often noted its sheer size and scope. The first Dean of Social Sciences referred to 'the numbers that numb'.<sup>14</sup>

Although Jennie Lee demanded a 'university with no concessions', increasing the number of graduates has never been the sole aim of the OU.<sup>15</sup> Far more people have started with the OU than have completed degrees through it. Indeed, the prediction made by a Professor of Adult Education in 1968, that 'it seems improbable that the Open University will produce an output of graduates greater than a medium-sized university' initially looked like it might prove accurate.<sup>16</sup> The OU stressed that its purpose was not simply to create more graduates, but to extend the concept of learning. Wilson envisaged a university for 'housewives who might like to secure qualifications in English Literature' and opportunities for non-vocational courses, for people who sought to improve their language skills before travelling abroad and also material for those who did not formally register but sought to 'enrich themselves by a more passive participation in the educational programmes'.<sup>17</sup> In 1972 the founding Professor of Systems at the OU, John Beishon, reiterated this theme, stating that 'we do not believe that the Open University should

stand or fall on the number of its graduates'. He went on to explain the hoped-for impact of the OU on its students:

'Our aim is not everybody to be a BA but what new learning opportunities could mean in their lives, in terms of renewal, change in occupation, refreshment, intellectual stimulation, new skills.'<sup>18</sup> The OU continued to be committed not to formal qualifications alone but to offering 'high-quality distance learning for all'.<sup>19</sup>

Some students did not intend to study for a degree but sought to achieve the qualifications they required through specific courses and packs. Some took modules but had no intention of sitting an exam; some transferred to other institutions after a few courses.<sup>20</sup> At most universities students graduated after a specific number of years, often three. At the OU it took longer for the number of OU graduates to build up. Students progressed between modules at a pace that suited them. Lindsay Ring started at the OU in 1978 when she had one small daughter, paused in her studies and resumed them after the birth of a fourth child. Michaela McNeill noted that 'It took me fourteen years to complete my Open University degree. That is the joy of the OU! You can take your time!'<sup>21</sup> The OU's modular system was endorsed by Susan Morris, who on graduation (aged 25 in 1974) concluded: 'having studied with the Open University actually gave me a great advantage over some of the other candidates. I had accumulated substantial and relevant work and voluntary experience.' Most OU students completed the modules they started but it could take them many years to finish a degree, studying for only a few hours each week. Some have taken far more modules than is required for a degree. Philip Sully has made studying a way of life. He started with the OU in 1973 and has taken at least 56 modules.<sup>22</sup> The completion rates could reflect that those studying on a part-time basis have less invested in their identity as students than those studying full time.<sup>23</sup>

Within the first few years approximately 75 per cent of those who registered for an OU course succeeded in getting credit for it. In 1981, of the 150,000 students who had been admitted to the OU over the preceding decade, only 45,000 of them had graduated. In regard to the rest, 45,000 had left without graduating and 60,000 were still at the university.<sup>24</sup> There were over 200 graduates in 1974, almost 1,000 in 1977 and 1,800 by 1992. Following a change in the requirements for graduation there was a peak year in 1994 when 7,800 degrees were awarded. After this the OU awarded between 6,000 to over 7,000 degrees each year.<sup>25</sup> The number of new students had grown to 47,000 in 1991 and to over 80,000 by 2009, a high percentage of the OU's total in that year of around 150,000 undergraduates and 30,000 postgraduates.<sup>26</sup>

It was not only the popularity of the OU which attracted attention but also the breadth of its appeal: 'Open university chancellor and window cleaner

among 5,800 latest graduates' ran one headline above an article which noted that 1 in 14 of all UK graduates came from the OU, that almost 25 per cent of graduates had not achieved the usual entry requirements, that over 10 per cent were in manual or routine office and service posts, and that almost 40 per cent were women.<sup>27</sup> In 1976 *The Economist* concluded that, 'the university was serving a different population from traditional universities'.<sup>28</sup> Many OU students rarely met with staff as tutorials were relatively infrequent, compared to contact hours of full-time students, and often students found it difficult to attend due to constraints of time or distance. As summer schools were – at least initially – compulsory, it was there that the distinctiveness of the students of the OU could be seen. Dr Ian Flintoff recalled how:

You can never go to an OU summer school without seeing this amazing cross-section of society. The first time it brought tears to my eyes, the beauty of it ... I was in an all-male college at Oxford which was mainly Etonians who were charming people, but I can't kid myself for a moment that Trinity had anything on the majesty or poetic brilliance and imagination of the Open University. The Open University is a century or two ahead of Oxford.<sup>29</sup>

Part of a tutor's list of those attending one summer school also demonstrated the range of students:

company directors and city councillors, pilots and priests, housewives and hairdressers, pregnant mothers and men from the Pru, social workers and salesmen, journalists and Justices of the Peace, doctors and dog breeders.<sup>30</sup>

Gary Slapper illustrated the different circumstances of OU students when he recalled some of the reasons given for requests for extensions on tutor marked assignments:

the commander of a major British submarine who was called into military service. Someone who had been shot in the course of duty ... it was a police officer while trying to stop a bank being robbed. Someone who had gone out to insert a pacemaker in an emergency roadside operation.<sup>31</sup>

Since the Second World War entrance to UK universities, although not based on A-levels alone, was increasingly determined by an applicant's prior qualifications. The OU bucked this trend and offered places initially on a 'first



come, first served' basis and then using a quota system based on regions and professions. In 1971 over 7 per cent of OU students had no formal educational qualifications and fewer than 9 per cent of entrants had an A-level or equivalent. In 1971 43 per cent of the new OU undergraduates were teachers and 67 per cent of all the undergraduates were in high-status occupations (administrators, managers, professions and arts, qualified scientists and engineers). Those in medium-status occupations, in the Armed Forces, or working as technicians, clerical and sales, accounted for a further 28 per cent. People in lower-status work accounted for 5 per cent. The percentage of teachers who started at the OU fell to between 30 and 37 per cent for the next four years, and the overall percentage of higher-status workers fell to 53 per cent by 1975. The percentage of lower-status workers attracted to the OU rose to 10 per cent, and the percentage of medium-status workers rose to 38 per cent.<sup>32</sup> During the 1970s the number of OU students with an A-level or equivalent qualification was never greater than 1,400. This changed in the 1980s, as the number of OU students who started with an A-level or equivalent almost tripled, then tripled again in the 1990s. Despite this rise, students with an A-level remained a minority in the OU student body. In the 1980s 8 per cent of OU students had no formal qualifications (compared to 1 per cent at other universities and 7 per cent at the polytechnics), and 16 per cent had O-level or equivalent (compared to 2 per cent at other universities and 12 per cent at the polytechnics).<sup>33</sup> In 2009 almost a half of new OU students had lower qualifications than the usual requirements of UK universities.

Individual stories behind the statistics of students with few or no prior qualifications emphasise the transformation of these students' attitudes towards education and their own abilities. Richard Baldwyn recalled 'the dreaded [OU] exam' which led him to be 'transported back some fifty years'.<sup>34</sup> Judith Hudson was given a rather backhanded recommendation of the OU by her Workers Education Association tutor, who told her, 'they take anyone!'<sup>35</sup> Michael Hume felt that the OU helped him to overcome 'the huge mental blocks A levels were giving me'. Emma referred to 'my biology teacher's absolute hatred of me'. She added that on her graduation: 'I will pay my Mum to put an advert in the local paper just as my friend's mother did [after the award of her daughter's PhD from the OU]'.<sup>36</sup> After her head teacher told her that she was unsuited to university, Vida Jane Platt recalls being 'distraught but obedient'. She nevertheless went on to study with the OU:

When I heard that I'd got a First Class Degree I drove into town. The shopping centre turned into the multicoloured set of a musical. It took me all my time not to break into a song and dance act. Finally I could

look everyone I met in the eye. I felt equal for the first time since that day in my headmistress's study.<sup>37</sup>

Some students gave positive accounts of their OU experience without specific reference to past humiliations. Jenny Millns compared 'how nervous, how uncertain' she felt on starting her degree course compared to how, aged 58, when she completed her degree, she felt 'for the first time in my life, a real sense of achievement'. She added that through her studies 'my mental health has remained stable, I don't have time to fret over my physical health and I'm keeping my brain active'.<sup>38</sup> Ian Ellson recalled opening his first course results letter: 'The amazing thing was that an hour and a half later I was still looking at this letter expecting it to say "Fail" when in reality it still stated "Passed".' He went on to be awarded a degree.<sup>39</sup>

The absence of entry requirements by the OU were balanced against the insistence by its founders that open access should not equate to lower standards. In 1965 Jennie Lee told the Commons, 'I am not interested in having the next best thing, a poor man's university of the air, which is the sort of thing that one gets if nothing else is within reach. We should set our sights higher than that'.<sup>40</sup> She was adamant 'that the most insulting thing that could happen to any working class man or woman was to have a working class university'.<sup>41</sup> 'It is a fallacy', she said, 'that the Open University was intended to be a working man's university. It is not a university of the working class, or the middle class or white man or black man or men or women. It is just a university'.<sup>42</sup> However, although she stressed that 'the last thing in the world that we wanted was a proletarian ghetto!', the OU became associated with the working class.<sup>43</sup> Terry Lewins, one of the first OU students, reflected that the university was 'a personal opportunity for me but I knew it was an opportunity for working class people, because it was not elitist'.<sup>44</sup> Former Conservative Education Minister William Van Straubenzee went even further, arguing that funding should be directed away from the OU when it did not attract as many working-class students as he deemed was an appropriate figure.<sup>45</sup> Tyrell Burgess claimed that the original Planning Committee of the OU had a sense of 'egalitarian idealism' and Ray Woolfe suggested that it set out 'to attract the under-educated and working-class cohorts in the population'. Such formulations were explicitly denied by a member of the Planning Committee, John Scupham.<sup>46</sup> The Open University was designed to offer support to a wide range of applicants rather than a single socio-economic group.

Whatever the planners' intentions, the OU reached lower socio-economic groups. If students are defined by the social class of their fathers (which was often the measure used to assess the social status of eighteen-year-old students)

then the percentage of working-class OU students has always been higher than at the institutions that gained university status before 1992. Many OU students had already climbed several rungs up the social ladder prior to starting their studies and it made relatively little sense to classify them by reference to their fathers. During its early years the OU asked applicants to self-code themselves. Approximately 10 per cent were in routine and semi-routine jobs, a third in lower-level white-collar jobs and just over half were professionals, managers or administrators. Initially, teachers (many with teaching certificates but not degrees) were the biggest single occupational group.<sup>47</sup> One of the practical ways in which the OU fulfilled the need identified by government to produce the human capital required by a highly skilled, science-based economy was to provide places for teachers at a time when their training was being shifted from teacher training colleges to the universities. By 1975 teachers constituted 60 per cent of all OU graduates. *The Economist* marked a decade of the OU by saying that it had 'become a cheap mechanism for turning the teaching profession into an all-graduate body' and that it was also a 'boon to the economy of the new town of Milton Keynes'. It called for the OU to have higher fees, to end its postgraduate teaching and to obtain funding from private sources.<sup>48</sup> Once the bulge of teachers had graduated, the percentage of those starting their studies at the OU with previous experience of higher education fell. The class profile remained similar: surveys in both 1976 and 2005 indicated that about half of OU students would categorise their parents as working class.<sup>49</sup> Even though there has been a rise in the number of students from lower socio-economic groups across the UK sector, class remains a strong indicator of likelihood of obtaining a university education. By the 1990s the wealthiest quarter of young people had approximately a 50 per cent chance of attending a university while the poorest quarter had only an 11 per cent chance.<sup>50</sup> During the period 1995–2005, those from middle-class homes were 50 per cent more likely to stay in education after 16 compared to their working-class counterparts, and, by 2005, 10 per cent of those entitled to free school meals left school with no qualifications at all.<sup>51</sup> The expansion of higher education had not seriously challenged the hierarchies and social exclusiveness of universities.<sup>52</sup>

Universities, it was argued in 2004, had 'disproportionately benefited children from relatively rich families' and the middle class. In 2010, 60 per cent of entrants to the twenty-four members of the Russell Group of universities were from professional backgrounds, compared with 49 per cent among other pre-1992 universities and 39 per cent among post-1992 institutions.<sup>53</sup> In 1996 the comparable figures had been 72 (Russell), 63 (pre-1992 universities) and 49 per cent (post-1992 universities) respectively.<sup>54</sup> It was notable that the OU continued to attract the 'socially and educationally less privileged'.<sup>55</sup>

A survey of UK universities in 2002 reported that ‘many students, especially working-class students, never get to the position where they can contemplate HE’. Many exclude themselves or avoid certain institutions, because they are concerned about ‘who they might become and what they must give up’.<sup>56</sup> Unlike isolated working-class students at elite universities, OU students did not need to move away from their familiar surroundings in order to study. As one tutor noted, ‘If our own students tend to be isolated from their teachers, at least they remain sturdily themselves, which might not be so easy for the bright working-class lad from Rochdale who “gets through” to Cambridge.’<sup>57</sup> In 1960 Lord James expressed concern about the children of clerks and technicians who came ‘from homes which are culturally pretty dim’ and went to university to find they had to negotiate ‘the struggle between the home or the sub-culture and the life that you are trying to make him [sic] lead and the values that you are trying to give him’. These students needed ‘positive guidance’ and a greater ‘emphasis on personal relationships’.<sup>58</sup>

Sarah Burge felt that being able to study in a similar way to other OU students (at home, part-time) meant that she was able to avoid the ‘psychological drain of being the odd-one-out all the time’ and that she felt ‘happier and more fulfilled’.<sup>59</sup> Such accounts indicate how the intention to promote a classless university was experienced by those who studied with it. A certain consciousness about class was evident at the OU. However, much of the awkwardness felt by isolated young working-class students who attended face-to-face universities was avoided.

In 1971 the University made its first foray into the international arena, with twenty students taking their exams overseas, including one on the weather ship in the North Atlantic with the ship’s captain as invigilator. By 1972, eighty-nine students stationed in Cyprus were registered for courses by special arrangement with the Ministry of Defence. In January 1974 the University opened its North American Office, which enabled US colleges to offer complete OU courses. Later the British Open University Foundation took over the work.

From the 1982 the OU, with British Council support, offered courses to British nationals resident in Brussels. The scheme was expanded in 1983 to include more courses and non-nationals and then other EU countries.<sup>60</sup> Tutor John Kirkaldy reported: ‘I have met every profession from casino croupier to cowman, and from millionaire to the unemployed’. He also noted that the students came from France, Germany, Holland and Spain and that he had ‘received essays dispatched from service personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan and from an ocean-going sea tanker somewhere between Japan and Australia’.<sup>61</sup> Often the Armed Services supported personnel in

their studies. Ian Price was stationed in Bagram, Afghanistan, on the day he had to take a German oral exam. The Ministry of Defence permitted him to make a call and he did his oral examination over the phone. Despite the telephone being cut off twice, he passed.<sup>62</sup> During the 1990s OU courses became available to residents of the European Union countries. The OU, by enabling access to the materials that it had produced in the UK, created international networks of transnational learners. Both universities and the English language have been credited as engines of globalisation.<sup>63</sup> The OU, with its vast international reach, played a part in this development.

At the time that the OU opened to students there had already been a quarter of a century 'of unprecedented growth and expansion', for higher education in the UK.<sup>64</sup> There were 400,000 students in the UK in the 1960s, a figure rising to two million by the turn of the twenty-first century, most of them aged under 25.<sup>65</sup> In 1965 about 10 per cent of students were aged over 25, primarily medical students who already had a first degree.<sup>66</sup> Concerns about the ability of adults to learn had diminished by this time. Between the wars Edward Thorndike demonstrated that while the ability of an adult to learn differed from that of a child, adults had the capacity to learn, something that had previously not been substantiated by research.<sup>67</sup> After the war Donald Hebb argued that, 'learning is not the same at all stages in development, but changes with experience. The infant is not at all capable of learning in the same way as an adult.'<sup>68</sup> Subsequently, magnetic resonance imaging has been used to map the brain from early childhood into adulthood and reveal that the frontal lobes, responsible for reasoning and problem solving, tend to develop when a person is in their twenties. This may have alleviated concerns about the abilities of OU students, 91 per cent of whom were aged over 25 in 1971. This percentage fell slowly, reaching around 75 per cent by 2006.

Some people with disabilities were particularly attracted to the OU. Mohanty concluded that, 'As there is no basic qualification for entry to the OU and most of its students are deprived or handicapped in some way or other, this University is the most socialistic in nature and spirit'.<sup>69</sup> In 1972, long before legislation encouraged other universities to accept students with disabilities,<sup>70</sup> the OU appointed a Senior Counsellor with special responsibility for this field. In 1973 there were 554 students with disabilities identified in the rest of full-time higher education; by comparison the OU had about 1,200. In 1975 it specifically undertook to 'continue to take all possible practical steps to enable full participation by disabled students in all aspects of University life', and a study concluded that students with disabilities had higher success rates than achieved by their non-disabled counterparts, and



**Figure 7.1** The 1978 Students Association (OUSA) study tour to Rome.

a drop-out rate markedly lower than for the general student population.<sup>71</sup> Maggy Jones reported that she had to leave another university because of lack of wheelchair access, adding that ‘for the severely handicapped the Open University is proving to be their first real educational opportunity’ (Figure 7.1).<sup>72</sup> Leslie Hayward lost his hearing at the age of nine, had little schooling and counted bottles at a factory for a living. He received his OU degree in 1975 because he could read materials, rather than having to listen to lectures.<sup>73</sup> One student said her choice had been made because ‘due to ill health I couldn’t take up the unconditional offers I had received from traditional universities’ and that her studies dovetailed with her work as ‘a full time Mum’.<sup>74</sup> A further reason for the relatively high number of students with disabilities might be because, on average, OU students were ten to fifteen years older than conventional, full-time, students.<sup>75</sup> John Cowan concluded that the students felt that within the OU they ‘had a community experience in which they cared for students with disabilities’. He recalled one summer school when, at about one o’clock in the morning, on seeing a severely disabled student arriving in a

vehicle adapted to take his wheelchair, he asked the student, ‘How is it going for you?’ And he looked at me and said, ‘I’ve just been to a party, and I’ve never been to a party in my life. And it was absolutely wonderful.’<sup>76</sup> Students with multiple disabilities continued to be attracted to the OU because, even though legislative changes improved access to other institutions, the OU continued to offer support across a range of disabilities. These included audio recordings and 3D diagrams for the visually impaired.<sup>77</sup>

### **Educating housewives**

Within a few days of the first OU TV broadcasts one newspaper noted the comic potential of women studying by watching television: ‘The whole idea of the Open University must be a cartoonist’s as well as a student’s dream. Just imagine the problem there may be in some homes when Dad wants to watch one channel, the kids a second and Mum is adamant that she must study for her degree.’<sup>78</sup> Even *Sesame*, the OU’s magazine, indicated concerns about women adult learners. One illustration showed a woman, complete with curlers and irritated expression, listening to the radio at just after 6am while her husband sleeps. Another wife foregrounds lack of self-confidence and the contents of Home Experiment Kits when she tells her husband ‘Looks like a tough course – the kit is a set of worry beads’. A man is reading his newspaper while his wife fails to multi-task, as so distracted is she by her text (a theoretical approach to power and heat) that the ironing has caught alight. She is labelled as ‘the housewife’. A housewife watching television, eating chocolates and drinking addresses her spouse, saying ‘When do we eat? When do we eat? – You just can’t get used to being married to an intellectual, can you!’<sup>79</sup> Michael Drake drew attention to another way in which the OU disrupted expectations about gender roles when he assessed the impact of summer schools. These

transformed the lives of women more than any other feature of the Open University. I think women who had often never left their home, either their parents’ home or the marital home, were suddenly meeting other people in a similar position.<sup>80</sup>

One of benefits of the popularity of the eponymous heroine of the play and film *Educating Rita* was that, by literally being on stage, Rita helped to take the OU off the metaphorical stage and make it a safe place for those who, as Betty Friedan argued in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) suffered from the problem with no name – housewives.

Among those questioned, the single most remarked upon attainment of OU students was an increase in self-belief.<sup>81</sup> Adult learners' enthusiasm for their engagement in learning has long been linked to their feeling of self-confidence.<sup>82</sup> A report on a post-war scheme to encourage adult learners, many without the minimum entry requirements, to attend university, concluded that such students on the scheme 'left university or college with an enhanced sense of self-esteem and a new ability to engage with political, economic and cultural life'.<sup>83</sup> In 1984 Jan Hobbs recalled that she was 'over the moon' to be offered a place at the OU as 'it was the first institution which wanted me for myself'.<sup>84</sup> Following her graduation she improved both her job and her self-esteem. Her remarks about confidence were 'repeated by women all over the country'.<sup>85</sup> One of the first students was Jacqueline White. She studied for three years at the OU before becoming a full-time student in London:

I found the work agreeably hard. It is bliss when you've grappled with a maths problem for days and then it comes out right. My difficulties were social ones ... I was always frightened they [the other students] were cleverer than I. However, I soon discovered that we were all equally shy and equally insecure and then everything was alright.<sup>86</sup>

The engagement of OU students (who have often been physically isolated from their fellow students) can also be connected to the support provided by their existing networks. As one of the first graduates noted, 'students need sympathetic families'.<sup>87</sup> Asked to rate the importance of sources of external support OU students placed family and friends at the top of the list. Although some represented their decision to become OU students as individual, often accounts refer to a recommendation from a family member.<sup>88</sup>

Sources of external support(students could give more than one source)<sup>89</sup>

Source	per cent
Family and friends	32
Tutors	29
Other students	21
Employers	19
The institution	17

Once studying began, the support of families remained important.<sup>90</sup> George Saint believed that 'My wife's support was responsible for my success more than my determination'.<sup>91</sup> Ernie Lowe joined the first intake in 1971. His children were born in that year and in 1973. He felt that his wife 'shielded



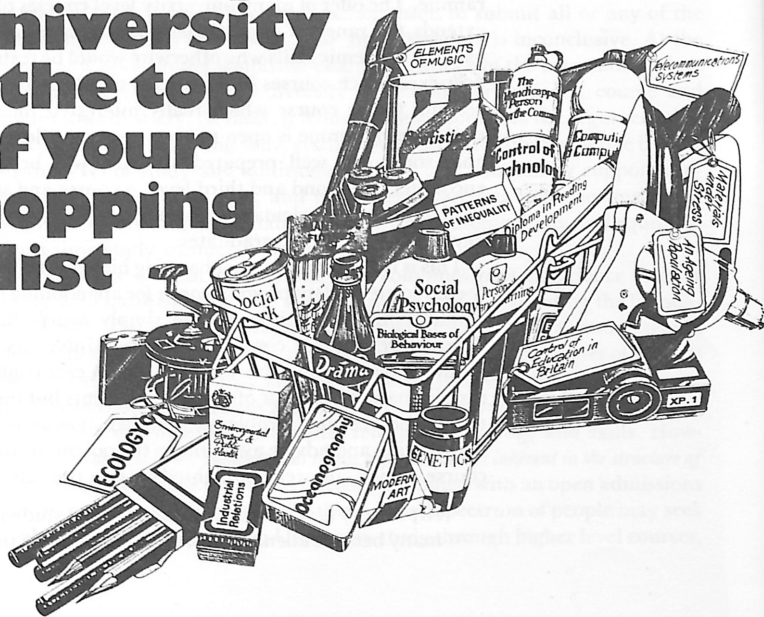
me from the demands of a young family'; he chose not to study for Honours because 'my wife deserved a rest and I wanted to enjoy my children'. Emma's comment reveals both a realisation about the unhelpfulness of a poor self-image and a changing relationship with a spouse:

Shouting 'I'm fat and stupid' at your husband will not make you understand the equations needed to calculate the emissions from an incinerator (though speaking to him nicely means he might just sit with you and talk it over in a very calm and patient manner).<sup>92</sup>

When providing materials for learners the OU had to take into account that these were not necessarily self-assured people with control over when and where they studied. Some of the OU's advertising reflects its ideas about potential students. In its second and third years the OU concentrated such advertising resources as it had into attracting 'women' and the 'working class'. An advertisement of a student changing a nappy with a home experiment kit in the background attracted attention but also caused some fury.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps it was because the novelty of learning through the OU was deemed to be disruptive of the familiar conventions about gender roles that the image of the housewife student was evoked in the OU's 'Guide to the Associate Student Programme' leaflet. Next to the words 'Put the Open University at the top of your shopping list' was a picture of the contents of a supermarket wire shopping basket. Items in and around the basket were labelled 'Social Work', 'Genetics' and, in the case of a sardine tin, 'Oceanography'. One item had a label reading 'Control of Education in Britain' and another 'Control of Technology' (Figure 7.2).<sup>94</sup> This suggested that the OU was emphasising that students could have some influence and that although a modular course structure might appear to be 'the ultimate supermarket model of total freedom of choice', there was still scope for staff and students to work in collaboration (Plate 22).<sup>95</sup>

As the percentage of women students across the country rose, so did the percentage of women who studied through the OU. In 1971 over 72 per cent of the 18,357 new OU students were male, the highest percentage for men of any year. Gradually the percentage of women increased. In 1970 there were 10 per cent more mature women students than in 1969, and the figure continued to rise during the 1970s.<sup>96</sup> In the late 1970s, when women formed 33.7 per cent of university students in the UK, they represented 42.2 per cent of the finally registered OU students.<sup>97</sup> Within the UK older and female students increased: by 1980, 34 per cent of students were 25 and over, and 40 per cent were women. The percentage of women within the OU student population rose to 50 per cent by 1987 and over 60 per cent in 2003. Moreover, at the OU 'women achieved

# Put the Open University at the top of your shopping list



**Figure 7.2** A learner could be conceptualised as both a student and a consumer.

higher grades than men'.<sup>98</sup> Widening access to higher education has tended to benefit middle- and upper-class young women.<sup>99</sup> The rise in the proportion of women students might reflect a broader social change exemplified by the passage of the Equal Pay Act, 1970, and the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975.

The role of the OU in women's increasing participation and achievement in higher education was used by some critics to marginalise both the university and its female students. The BBC publication *Radio Times* introduced the first broadcasts of OU materials by asking:

New hope for education-hungry adults, or just a new hobby for middle-class housewives? A radical new learning process or an ill-considered muddle of television, radio and correspondence course? An important educational breakthrough or a jaded, semi-political, gimmick?<sup>100</sup>

The OU was alleged to be a 'haven for housebound Guardian housewives'.<sup>101</sup> It was suggested that the OU might act as a 'consciousness-raising stimulus' for female students.<sup>102</sup> Women were such a threat to *The Spectator* that it collapsed the range of learners who could access the OU into a dismissive category

risation: 'a useful instrument of middle-aged housewives with nothing much to do of an afternoon ... it seems quite impossible for it to provide any alternative to a university education ... it is certainly no university and in all probability not open'.<sup>103</sup> Others echoed the theme, calling the title of the OU paradoxical in that 'Open' implies opportunities for the educationally disadvantaged while 'University' suggests academic standards comparable with other universities.<sup>104</sup> In 1983 the OU started to present *The changing experience of women*, U221, which, with its successor, *Issues in women's studies*, U207, ran for seventeen years until 1999. Over 8,300 students studied the modules, 94 per cent of them women. A crèche was arranged for the residential schools associated with the module.<sup>105</sup> The course's objectives were apparently lost on a reporter at *The Times*. A report on the OU's women students in 1984 included an interview with Jan Hobbs, who left school at 16, received her OU degree while aged in her mid-40s and was by this point studying for her Honours. The reporter noted that while Jan said that she was happy, the garden was 'a confusion of weeds and piles of unmatched socks sit jumbled in a chair' (Plate 23).<sup>106</sup>

Some students found that their studies disturbed previously held expectations about relationships and lifestyles. Those who offered accounts which affirmed that studying strengthened familial ties were perhaps recognising that education can disrupt, that learning with the OU changes lives, that while for them education was the lighting of a fire which provided warmth, others felt burned. While many women felt supported by their families and friends, such buttressing could not be assumed. Despite being married to 'a sympathetic husband', Jill MacKean ('housewife with five children') felt guilty about the time that she spent studying, noting that 'most working mothers suffer to some extent from domestic and maternal bad conscience: I started baking my own bread and doing my own laundry at the same time that I started my OU course.'<sup>107</sup> To be successful, teaching at the OU had to recognise that its students were likely to have conflicting calls on their time and to have anxieties which full-time students may not have shared. It could not treat them as passive, genderless, recipients if it was to have an impact on their lives.

Alexandra (Alex) Richards studied two foundation courses in 1980 and 1983, and her husband was also an OU student. Despite this familiarity with the OU she felt challenged when he started to study *Art and environment*, TAD292. She recalled that it was 'very strange for me and a little bit threatening because it was so unusual'. It was

a course that really provoked your thinking and it was a course that made you re-evaluate things and in a way that can be quite tricky in a relationship, you know somebody starts doing very different things

and mixing with very different people ... a lot of relationships got a bit sunk by TAD[292]. It did cause a lot of ripples ... it was about people's thinking differently and being open to different things and I think that is quite threatening. I experienced it as very threatening.<sup>108</sup>

Others mentioned ways in which the demands of study at the OU challenged household structures and conventions. Matt Kendall felt it was reasonable to utilise the table in the spare room but recalled that a 'matrimonial' resulted from his experiment involving suspending a brick in the airing cupboard.<sup>109</sup> One child is reported to have remarked, 'Mummy, that university is sending you silly. All you say is "um"'. Susan Swete said, 'it upsets my husband sometimes ... We argue, well debate sometimes. He thinks I've gone left-wing ... I live differently ... I have less social life by choice.'<sup>110</sup> A number of approaches were taken when explaining the ways in which OU studies challenged conventional family structures. A summer-school counsellor recalled talking with a woman who said, 'Well you know what? My husband rang me up and he was up to his neck in it with the kids and I can't believe I laughed.' She continued, 'And I don't miss my *Mr Sheen* a bit.'<sup>111</sup> Clare Burdett wrote, 'When I joined the Open University it became a way of life, not just a spare time activity', and Doris Lawrence observed that the OU 'transformed my way of thinking'. Another student captured the welcome disruption the OU can cause when she summarised her experience thus: 'It messes up your whole life, but it's worth it.'<sup>112</sup>

For some the egalitarian principles of the OU involved changes within existing relationships. *The Times* reported the case of the woman who, while eight months pregnant with her third child, left her children with her husband while she attended summer school.<sup>113</sup> When Alan Gordon's wife Sylvia became both an OU student and active within student representation he stayed at home with four sons aged 4–11 years old.<sup>114</sup> While male students were often relieved of childcare and household duties and received help from their partners, women found that the demands on their time increased. Some felt the need to compensate for their studies by being better mothers and partners.<sup>115</sup> In an article about housewife students, Margaret Powers reflected, 'perhaps I listen more intently to the children's tales and troubles than full-time mothers. I have to convince myself they don't suffer because of the way of life I have chosen.' The piece concluded that 'help with the washing up is fine, but far more [was the support of husbands to provide] constant reassurance to assuage your built-in guilt for not warming his slippers'.<sup>116</sup> In 1992 a national survey found that full-time working women (that is, about 80 per cent of women undergraduates at the OU) had 3.3 hours of free time on weekdays compared to 4.5 for men, and 10.3 at weekends compared to 12.1 for men.<sup>117</sup>

### **Learners as teachers: expert *tadpoleous***<sup>118</sup>

*Art and environment*, TAD292 (1976–85), crossed disciplinary boundaries. It sought to promote both a better understanding of the environment (as noted in the ‘Environment at the OU’ box in the previous chapter) but also the self-esteem of learners. In 1977 Professor of Adult Education Roby Kidd argued that ‘the deepest foundations for learning are self-confidence, trust, belief and love’.<sup>119</sup> At the OU there has been recognition that the reinforcement of feelings of confidence often aided academic success.<sup>120</sup> TAD292 sought to develop ‘strategies for creative work’. It dealt with ‘the processes and attitudes of art not so much as these were evidenced in products of art but as they underlie the very act of doing art. This can be seen already from the titles which were given to some of the units in the course: “Boundary Shifting”, “Imagery and Visual Thinking”, “Having Ideas by Handling Materials”’.<sup>121</sup> TAD292 students were offered a range of projects. One was that the students cease their activities in order to engage in listening. Another was to compose a score for sounds made from differently textured papers and a third was to enumerate the household’s activities and categorise these in terms of role and sex stereotyping. The aims of the course were attitudinal, sensory and subjective rather than cognitive, relating to feeling rather than knowledge. They were ‘more phenomenological than conceptual in nature’.<sup>122</sup> Assessment involved a student submitting not only the product, such as a self-portrait photograph, but also notes describing the process and rationale behind its creation. The criteria were not specific but involved formulations including enthusiasm, imagination and authenticity. Former TAD292 student Dale Godfrey concluded that ‘the ethos behind the TAD course was you built your own hoops and then decided whether you wanted to jump through them or not’.<sup>123</sup>

Some TAD292 students, fresh from its summer school, organised a camp at which they developed the learning and activities associated with the OU summer schools.<sup>124</sup> Soon an annual camp was instituted and the Tadpole Society developed. Tadpoles, members of the society created by former students of the module, ‘share skills, experiences, ideas and knowledge of creativity and personal growth’.<sup>125</sup> One member called it ‘a lovely way of spending time, growing and learning’.<sup>126</sup> When Tony Whitaker sought to conceptualise the relationship between TAD292 and his subsequent learning, he said TAD292 ‘opened a door that said “There is another world out there” and the Tadpoles allowed me to go out there and play for the last 20 odd years’.<sup>127</sup> Alex Richards used a similar metaphor. She said: ‘what it did was open up to me the possibilities for us as human

beings and our capacity for kindness and compassion and creativity and to actually achieve things as a group that I didn't know about before'. John Leach also spoke about gaining control, noting that TAD292 'changed me completely because I actually stopped looking for results and was looking at the process of what I was doing and if I didn't want to do something I wouldn't do it. It just freed me up from the constraints of expectation.' Edwina Nixon found that TAD292 led her to gain a 'perspective that was very different on creativity and people consciousness'.<sup>128</sup>

Having gained a sense that further learning through the OU was possible and pleasurable, the students formed their own communities. Members offered accommodation to one another, held weekend events at their own homes and travelled abroad together.<sup>129</sup> Alex Richards recalled that

it was just being in another reality for a weekend when you went away. We'd all go and meet in each other's houses and it was like so much of ordinary life was suspended ... There was always an element of creativity.

She said that, from being a Tadpole, 'I think I learnt everything ... I learnt what I needed to learn' and that being a Tadpole was a way of 'trying to serve'. She connected this to her understanding of TAD292, where she felt 'absorbed in being creative and having your thinking ignited'.<sup>130</sup> One Tadpole called the experience 'a re-familizing. My family I am very fond of but I have a much wider family [and with] some of the people I have enjoyed deeper relationships.'<sup>131</sup>

Female OU students were more likely than their male counterparts to involve their families and fellow students in their studies.<sup>132</sup> Students reported that through studying they became better able to help their children to learn.<sup>133</sup> Joanne Pye was 'inspired' by her mother's studies with the OU. Soon afterwards she realised 'I needed to be proud of myself too'.<sup>134</sup> Deidre Nelson, born in 1971 to parents who were both OU students, also came to the university through parental involvement. She felt that her studies led her children to gain a sense of the value of education. Pam Jarvis studied with the OU, became an OU tutor and then completed three other degrees.<sup>135</sup> This activity 'created some of the background' for her son, who went on to study for a PhD.<sup>136</sup> In framing their studies and their achievements in terms of families these students reinforced the role attributed to families within society and helped to integrate the OU within people's lives and the wider society. The

idea spread that learners benefitted not only from well-constructed teaching materials but also from tutors, fellow students and sportive kinship and social networks. Other universities and the government-funding body recognised that by encouraging students to support each other and learn co-operatively, attainment, student cohesion and retention could be improved.<sup>137</sup>

The OU's profound impact on students' relationships stemmed from the deeply personal motivations for study. While many undertook study in order to improve their career prospects, others were driven by more personal reasons. The explanatory category which was most popular with those who had not received funding from an employer was 'enjoyment'.<sup>138</sup> In 2007 the most commonly reported reason for study was 'progression and personal development'.<sup>139</sup> Ron Sambell started at the OU because he felt 'a desperate need to have a more fundamental understanding of science and technology'.<sup>140</sup> Jackie Diffey felt that when mailings arrived it was 'like getting a Christmas present'.<sup>141</sup> Vida Jane Platt wrote, 'Oh the bliss of waiting for the new year's course material to drop through the letter box and the pleasure in doing those TMAs'.<sup>142</sup> Elinor Ashby remembered how 'I was often so excited by the arrival of my units that I would stand over the cooker stirring home-made soup whilst avidly reading'.<sup>143</sup> Audrey Moore, who started her studies in 1974, recalled that the television programmes were often on early in the morning and she was 'frequently rather tired going to work', but one programme, on the Cuban revolution, 'inspired me to want to sing and dance all the way to work'.<sup>144</sup>

There was previous experience in the higher education sector of instruction at a distance, of teaching mature students and those with disabilities, and of provision for part-time students and those without prior qualifications. Nevertheless, to bring all these ideas together and launch a vast new university using a range of communications technologies, distinctive notions of distributed learning and offers of personal support for independent learners was a bold idea. It dramatically shifted the scope, range and pedagogies of higher education. The generic structures of the OU enabled students in different countries and at different times to study the same material and be assessed according to the same criteria. Yet this process was experienced by individual students as a deeply personal one. Since at least the early nineteenth century, when the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge published inexpensive educational texts aimed at encouraging the auto-didactic, there have been learners who have demonstrated great perseverance in overcoming barriers of disability, social class and educational classification. The OU can be seen as part of this tradition of encouraging individuals to transform their prospects, self-understanding and relationships.

### **‘Short-haired students keen to work’: experiencing summer school<sup>145</sup>**

OU summer schools have, for better and worse, become mythic.<sup>146</sup> Their timing coinciding with the ‘silly season’ for the national press, and being run on university campuses largely empty of full-time students, made them a gift to newspaper journalists eager for salacious copy.<sup>147</sup> *The Times* reported the case of Carol Park, who left her husband and children to live with David Brearley after the pair had met at summer school.<sup>148</sup> Stuart Hall recalled that ‘I’ve never been anywhere else in the academic world where a husband turned up and said, “My wife’s going home ... She’s coming home with me. I’m not leaving her in any longer.”’<sup>149</sup>

Before the OU opened, the residential element of its teaching had been endorsed by Crowther, Young, Jennie Lee’s White Paper and the OU Planning Committee.<sup>150</sup> The use of university property in the vacations for residential group-learning programmes for adults had significantly grown in popularity since the war. The OU schools were intended to enable students to make use of the laboratories and other facilities and to attend lectures and seminars led by experts in the field. These aims, together with the mutual support offered by students, feature in Sally Ford’s recollection of her experiences of SXR205, *Exploring the molecular world* in Nottingham:

The first day of activities was so hectic, I thought I would be left behind at times, but on voicing my worries to my fellow students I realised that everyone was in the same boat, and more importantly, we were all helping each other and working as a team instinctively. Over five-and-a-half days, I had written over 80 pages in my lab notebook. More importantly, I had put an awful lot of theory into practice, and got vital laboratory experience that I would not have been able to gain otherwise. [Figure 7.3]<sup>151</sup>

Students frequently concluded that residential schools transformed their understandings (Figure 7.4).<sup>152</sup> Tutor Sue Danks pointed out: ‘The students’ lack of experience with even basic equipment can hinder understanding at the beginning, but being mature students and working in the laboratory for a whole week means they learn very quickly’ (Figure 7.5).<sup>153</sup> Residential schools were staffed by academic course team members and tutors, and ran for several weeks on many sites, though any one student would attend one campus for only one week.<sup>154</sup>

Many students, worried about their intellectual capacities and grateful for the opportunity to be away from everyday chores, worked diligently





**Figure 7.3** Residential schools provided an opportunity to engage in lab work.



**Figure 7.4** OU students often study alone. Residential schools provided opportunities to meet with other students.



**Figure 7.5** At residential schools student experimentation sometimes involved other students. Those attending *Biology brain and behaviour*, SD206, summer school at University of York in the mid-1990s (the module was presented 1992–2001) had the opportunity to measure nerve conduction velocity – how fast information travels along a nerve cell. A volunteer wore shorts to the class and allowed other students to administer a small electric shock to a nerve in his leg and record how long it took to reach a point further down his leg. Other practicals on SD206 involved teaching a rat to press a lever, counting the number of cheeps a day-old chick makes and investigating wood lice in a maze.

and enthusiastically (Figure 7.6). Nevertheless, there was press ridicule and outrage.<sup>155</sup> John Kirkaldy remembers that a journalist he escorted around a Bath summer school was disgusted when he found ‘No nookie and no pot!’<sup>156</sup> *The Times* headlined an account of the ‘University where a lecture begins with a beer’, while the BBC ran a story about ‘bizarre games and happenings’ including OU students who ‘made bare bottom prints ... dragged rubbish through the streets [and] appeared to be aimlessly kicking a giant rugby ball about’.<sup>157</sup> It was not only students who were accused of taking advantage of the intense atmosphere generated at summer schools. One professor was recalled by Barbara Vowles as being ‘unfailingly kind, courteous’ but also ‘a hazard’ to female students’.<sup>158</sup>

The OU’s monthly magazine for students and staff, *Sesame*, fanned the flames. The September 1974 edition, for example, carried a number of post-summer-school messages. One read, ‘A. I will never forget York. The spark



**Figure 7.6** As part of a summer school in design there was an evaluation of the Sinclair C5. This battery-assisted tricycle was produced in 1985. There were few sales. The rider was exposed to the weather and had no gears to assist when it was being pedalled uphill.

of affinity still glows bright. H.’ Another declared, ‘I loved you for a week, a week to fit uncrowded in an hour of normal life. Now I know there are no separate compartments in the mind because I cannot lock you out. And you refuse to go.’<sup>159</sup> References to summer schools were later banned from the personal advertisements of *Sesame*. The press coverage had other effects. Professor Stuart Hall remembered an outraged husband arriving to collect his wife midway through the summer school.<sup>160</sup> John Greenall, the first director of information services, recalled an article by Education Correspondent John Izbicki: ‘in the middle of the first summer school that the OU had held, this quite big article in *The Daily Telegraph* appeared which was highly critical of the University and more or less indicated that it would close.’<sup>160</sup>

The idea that it was through working together that problems were resolved was reflected in the teaching materials. These took an ‘integrated approach’ and were ‘creative, formative and very influential’.<sup>162</sup> This co-operative model was developed further when, in 1978, instead of discussing course choices on an individual basis with students, a tutor and a tutor-counsellor in London encouraged a cohort of students to study the same course together. The tutor involved in this activity stressed that ‘students of mathematics must meet other mathematicians, they must talk to one another and with one

another and try out the concepts involved in mastering the subject without being afraid to make naive statements'.<sup>163</sup> The result was that the module enjoyed a greater than expected retention rate. Moreover, the OU retained a high number of women and people with few academic qualifications.<sup>164</sup> The strategy of enabling learners to construct meanings together continued to be of importance. When in 2000 the Vice-Chancellor attended the OU's first Spanish summer school, held at the University of Santiago, he noted that 'local and OU tutors formed a cohesive team and the activities had been carefully and imaginatively designed to maximise the time that students spent speaking Spanish in a variety of situations'.<sup>165</sup>

Students at residential schools found that they benefitted from the opportunities for clarification and consolidation of knowledge. They also spent long periods studying and revising, and enjoyed meeting course team authors and having the opportunity to learn from specialised tuition.<sup>166</sup> Professor of History Arthur Marwick argued that

The Summer Schools enable students who are having difficulties to get to grips with the problems of the study of primary sources and ... have the opportunity to enter into a much more detailed study of individual film items ... by careful use of the media we can enable students to share in experiences not possible for the conventional university student ... it is the imaginative use of media which gives a special quality to Open University education.<sup>167</sup>

Students could also access places they might not otherwise have visited, including academic libraries and art galleries. Student Maggie Donaldson recalled that a Summer School trip around the National Gallery led by Charles Harrison 'was such an exciting experience, and made me feel like I was a "real" student for a while, being taught by an inspirational expert on the subject. He was a class act in every way'.<sup>168</sup> When surveyed in 1972, students ranked residential schools as the most helpful teaching component – ahead of correspondence tuition, television, tutorials, counselling and radio.<sup>169</sup> Subsequent studies also found them to be seen as educationally beneficial.<sup>170</sup> A student account from 1972 offered a balancing perspective: 'We all had the most marvelous time at the summer School at Keele with late-night parties after the classes had finished for the day'.<sup>171</sup> Former Labour minister Richard Crossman, who had been sceptical about the OU before it opened and remained so after a trip to Walton Hall, returned from observing summer schools at Bath full of praise for the 'remarkable' teaching. 'I'd never seen people working with such intensity and also enjoying themselves', he



wasn't. I had a fabulous time ... a week of being a "real" student ... it's in my Top Ten List of Best Experiences Ever.<sup>176</sup> Some students found considerable pleasure in intense study and the sudden reduction of intellectual isolation. Mark Youngman, who attended summer school in 2000, recalled both the intensity and the differences from his home life:

During the week we were kept very busy from 9 am often to 8 or 9 pm with only an hour for lunch and dinner ... I couldn't believe how quickly the week had gone by ... The most satisfying thing of all was that I had been able to talk about my course with like-minded people, people who knew what I was talking about and had the same problems, fears and assignment deadlines as myself. I could never have talked to my wife or anyone else in the same way.<sup>177</sup>

Residential schools were seen to boost motivation and progression. Attendance might have added a few percentage points to a student's final exam score. Tutor Joan Christodoulou said that they offered opportunities to provide remedial support and advice on exams and that the student benefitted from 'the intellectual discussion and sitting up all night talking'.<sup>178</sup> Summer schools were said to provide an opportunity to receive peer reassurance at a time when students were part way through an individual course and many were 'floundering', as Professor Michael Drake put it. He added that 'a lot of students thought they were the only ones who were not coping and everyone else knew more than they did'.<sup>179</sup> Tutor Sean Cubitt argued that the *Popular culture*, U206, summer schools provided 'spaces where students can air their problems with the course and pursue their learning in new directions'.<sup>180</sup>

### **Stirling efforts**

In 1976 Mike Hey started to tutor at Stirling Summer Schools. He recalled:

After dinner, things began in earnest. The 'set book' for the Maths Foundation Course (M100 at that time) was Polya's 'How to solve it', and the first session was to be a group problem-solving exercise involving the well-known problem of the number of areas formed by  $n$  intersecting lines, extended to  $n$  intersecting planes. There were some impediments to my success in this venture:

- a) I didn't know the answer
- b) I wasn't at all sure that I understood the question
- c) All the other tutors appeared to have mastered both a) and b), and

d) I had little hope that any of my group of students would know what to do either.

My expressed fears in this area were dismissed by the Course Director with a wave of the hand and a comment to the effect that 'it's much better if you don't know what to do; the students can follow your problem-solving processes better'. (This was my one point of disagreement with OU philosophy throughout my summer school career – I did not, and still do not, believe that the interests of the students are best served by the fuddled machinations of tutors who don't know what they're doing.) To cut a long story short, my fears were realised. I talked a lot, wrote a lot on the blackboard, came out in hot and cold sweats, and at the end of the hour neither I nor the students were any the wiser as to a) or b) above.<sup>181</sup>

Problem-solving as pedagogy was put to use more successfully by John Mason, who designed and implemented the first OU mathematics summer school. It involved 5,000 students over eleven weeks on three sites. Mason instituted active-problem-solving sessions, which later became investigations. He also developed project-work for students.<sup>182</sup>

The teaching staff also recalled the intensity of residential schools (Plate 24). Sir John Daniel, later the Vice-Chancellor, recalled his first Summer School:

that summer of 1972 in the UK was a conversion experience. I saw the future of higher education and wanted to be part of it. Everything was hugely impressive and stimulating. First there was the scale: the Open University already had 40,000 students in its second year of operation. Second came the idealism: here were people who walked the talk on access and student-centred pedagogy. Third, there was palpable love of learning: the students were unbelievably motivated by the opportunity presented to them. I went to one of the residential summer schools where students spent a full day in labs, seminars and field trips and then most of the night in the bar; continuing the academic discourse. Fourth, I was captivated by the media and technology: my key task was to help develop computer-marked assignments that tested advanced cognitive skills, but I spent every spare moment viewing the brilliant BBC television programmes. This exposure to the future of higher education infected me with the virus of open and distance learning.<sup>183</sup>

In 1973 Peter Montagnon noted the enthusiasm of the students to talk with academics.

And talk to them these students do – from breakfast-time to bedtime non-stop. This is an exhilarating experience for them all but, I suspect, particularly so for the lecturers from the more conventional universities. It is the reversal of the situation that is to be found on so many of our campuses ... The students not only want to hear what their lecturers have to say, they pursue them – almost hunt them down – until they have said it.<sup>184</sup>

A reporter claimed that ‘it wasn’t the students who complained about hard work but the tutors who were apparently unused to such keen students’.<sup>185</sup> Another noted that older OU students provided ‘a highly critical audience’ for A. J. P. Taylor’s lecture about the Second World War.<sup>186</sup> Former tutor Christopher Harvie, who married a tutor who he met at a Norwich summer school, argued that ‘summer schools altered the whole demography of Britain’. He also recalled ‘teaching for three weeks instead of the statutory two at the Stirling summer school, of which some tabloid – I think it was probably the *News of the World* – remarked, “Cool it, telly dons are told!”’<sup>187</sup>

### **Changing times, changing methods**

From the outset the OU subjected every part of its teaching to continuing scrutiny, up to and including the summer schools which were so salient a part of its offering. While those who attended them attested to the intellectual engagement and motivation of students and saw a positive correlation between attendance and recruitment, retention and results, their value for money was questioned from the early 1970s. Although an early Senate resolution made attendance at residential schools compulsory, that decision was questioned by the Faculty of Technology soon after it was created. In 1974 Hilary Perraton noted ‘euphoria’ gained ‘within the social situation in which students can learn together’ but then asked ‘whether it’s as valuable as the amount of money you spend on it’.<sup>188</sup> In 1975 a paper addressed the question as to which OU students were deterred by the prospect of summer school of the OU before concluding that ‘probably nobody would argue against foundation course summer schools remaining compulsory’.<sup>189</sup> During the 1990s the Mathematics Faculty decided to rewrite its foundation course without a residential school. Studies sought to quantify the gain of OU residential schools.<sup>190</sup> One considered the records of 1,500 students and concluded that ‘the value of traditional



teaching components of courses taken by thousands of students each year was shown to be overestimated'.<sup>191</sup>

Evidence accumulated that the residential element had little bearing on the measured achievement of students. Residential schools were expensive for students. In 1994 21,000 students paid over £4 million to attend the week-long events. The *Guardian* reported that 'online tutorial groups are replacing the legendary summer schools. They're simply cheaper' (Figure 7.8).<sup>192</sup> General shifts in lifestyles made it difficult for many students to attend. Some students felt that their families were resentful of this use of annual leave and found being away stressful. Writing in 2001, one student noted that attendance could 'be a problem for some people who have to take time off work or find someone to look after the



**Figure 7.8** Tutorial support could involve using technology to support learning.

kids'.<sup>193</sup> Alternative learning experiences had to be created. These aimed to deliver the same core learning outcomes through a variety of methods. These have included a written assignment, an online project and computer conferencing. While these may not have delivered the breadth of learning opportunities offered by residency, they undermined the distinctiveness of the pedagogic benefits of the residential schools. Different means of supporting learners such as the virtual microscope and other forms of online communications became accessible to students. These online activities sought to recreate aspects of the residential experience and offer an alternative to the intensive experience of face-to-face teaching.<sup>194</sup> New media, the virtual reality of *SecondLife* for example, became more popular and enabled people to exchange ideas and work together without being in the same room at the same time.

Residential schools continued to be an integral element of some modules. In 2012 there were business schools, day schools and summer schools for over thirty modules. These offered opportunities for intellectual and social mixing and for students to gain practical skills and to develop their communication and group-working abilities and examination techniques. However, residential schools were no longer a compulsory element on first-level modules (formerly Foundation courses) and were less frequently featured in the press. The need for the OU to prove that it offered a comparable experience to fully residential universities had diminished. The requirement that students gain hands-on experiences, rather than virtual ones had, in the globalised online world, been reduced.

### **Learning inside**

The OU's role in educating prisoners divides opinions. One MP described the OU's offer of higher education to students in prisons and secure environment as an 'example of gold-plated rights for convicted criminals at the expense of their victims and the law-abiding majority'.<sup>195</sup> The OU argued that its work in prisons was 'a key part of its mission to widen participation in higher education especially by those groups who are traditionally excluded', while the Prison Service conceptualised OU study as 'a vital part of resettlement and a route to reducing re-offending' (Plate 25).<sup>196</sup> Among the first OU students who started in January 1971 were twenty-two serving prisoners.<sup>197</sup> In 1985, 150 prisoners in thirty-one establishments were registered as OU students, and by 1989 the OU was the main provider of university-level study to prisoners. Prisons teams were established in each of the OU's regional and national

centres. By 2006 there were over 1,200 OU students in prisons, and by 2011 there were around 1,800 OU students in more than 150 prisons across the UK and Ireland.<sup>198</sup> They were studying over 200 courses across all faculties.

Johnny (to maintain anonymity, some of the students in prison are identified here only by their first names), who studied for his first degree and his PhD through the OU while in prison, said, 'I got hooked on education with The Open University. And I study now for knowledge, for knowledge's sake, and I love it ... The single most important thing that education in prison has given me is a sense of self-worth.' Barry also emphasised the change in his confidence, the importance of his tutor and how he had come to realise that 'you make your own light at the end of the tunnel'.<sup>199</sup> It is not just the prisoners who felt that there was a benefit. Katla Helgason, who played an important part in the creation of the Scottish Prison Scheme, felt that the work of the OU was clear: 'we are delivering education'.<sup>200</sup> The first Dean of Arts recalled that

One of the more moving letters I have received came from a tutor in the Isle of Wight to say what a therapeutic effect the Socrates units had had on long-time prisoners in Parkhurst gaol.<sup>201</sup>

In the early 1980s two modules based on the OU course *The pre-school child* were developed for use by prisoners (only prisoners whose offences do not relate to children are allowed to study on courses which include any material on children). One prisoner in Barlinnie felt that his relationship with his wife and children had dramatically improved, saying, 'They get more out of me and I get more out of them'.<sup>202</sup>

Prisoners were motivated by interest and felt that success aided their confidence. The conclusion of Linda of HMP Morton Hall might have been expressed by any OU student: 'At first I thought I would not meet the requirements ... my results give me joy and hope'.<sup>203</sup> Robert recalled that his success with assignments 'boosted my self-belief in my capabilities, which prior to that were a little bit low'.<sup>204</sup> John mentioned the development of a sense of self-worth, Trevor felt that 'the OU has built my self-esteem up' while James also stressed the previous lack of confidence and how education could help prisoners to 'pay something back to society'.<sup>205</sup> John L. wrote that having spent much of the period since the age of 15 in prison he had low self-esteem. However, he met a helpful tutor, studied *Astronomy and mechanics of the universe* through the OU and, having previously been classified as a danger to the prison population and to the community, began work as a peer tutor, helping people learn how to read and write.<sup>206</sup> Others also spoke of the transformative effects of study. Tony, HMP Wymott, said that 'OU study

has completely changed me as a person. As well as being more knowledgeable about social issues, I am much more confident and optimistic about the future'. Ben, HMP The Wolds, felt that 'learning has widened my outlook and interests', while Nigel, HMP Frankland, found his studies to be a 'practical, life-affirming endeavour'. Edwin, HMP Chelmsford, felt that he gained 'a new perspective on [his] life'.<sup>207</sup> Several of those who were interviewed while in prison expressed the hope that study would improve their intellectual, psychological and career prospects. Trevor commented, 'education has rehabilitated me', and Conor said, 'It keeps me sane'.<sup>208</sup>

These comments echoed the information provided for prisoners by the OU. This refers to the value of 'constructive and worthwhile' activities, how some people 'gain confidence and belief in their own abilities', and notes that some prisoners have gained 'opportunities for a new start after release'.<sup>209</sup> Prisoners also echoed some of the remarks made by non-prisoners about the sense of release and of change found through study. John started to write while in prison and discovered: 'You really don't feel like you're in prison, it's just everything disappears in the background. ... when I have the story sort of set up and lined up in the direction I want to go ... I'm in with my characters in the story and just the prison's not there.' An OU student from a middle-class background felt that his studies while in prison were 'An expression of an alienation I already felt. I applied so that for just a few hours a week I could get away from the obscenities, the prison gossip, the scheming. A lot of us are alienated before we start this sort of thing'.<sup>210</sup>

The Home Office paid each student's fees, and provided the necessary equipment in terms of set books, projectors, tape cassettes and films, but acceptance of students in prison onto OU courses has always been at the discretion of the governor. There were additional hurdles to study. Modules which involved the use of Home Experiment Kits were excluded and the prisons' tutor organisers were appointed counsellors.<sup>211</sup> Some prisons did not permit access to CDs, or the use of PCs. There is a paucity of books. In the early part of the new century access to the internet was uneven within the wider population (4 per cent of households in Northern Ireland, 53per cent in England, and while 84per cent of those aged 16–24 were users, only 15per cent of those aged over 65 were).<sup>212</sup> In addition, many students in the armed forces, secure hospitals or prisons found it difficult to access the internet. This made it hard to peruse materials only published via the course website and to take part in online discussions. Reading, updating and commenting on blogs and wikis was difficult, as was watching online videos and podcasts, performing online searches, completing quizzes, writing and submitting assignments, visiting the online library and receiving module news posted online. Some prisoners made

use of an intermediary, a family member or tutor, but this was not always straightforward. A sample of ninety-one students suggested that most wrote their assignments by hand and then typed them up during the brief periods of access.<sup>213</sup> Katla Helgason felt that tutors 'had to be very proactive and very positive'.<sup>214</sup> Some tutors downloaded online conference messages for prisoners and one brought in pictures for a student studying astronomy.

A virtual campus for Offender Learners was tested at HMP Wormwood Scrubs in 2008, and HMP Whitemoor ran Offline Moddle, an off-line version of the virtual learning environment software which the OU used to deliver its teaching systems. After funding and security issues were addressed, POLARIS, the Programme for Offender Learning and Resettlement Information Services, was trialled in Wormwood Scrubs and Latchmere House, an open prison, and then five other prisons in London. Services using it included LearnDirect, Meganexus and Jobcentre Plus as well as the OU. There were ten workstations for offender access installed at each site. The aim was to provide a secure internet which would give students in prison access to a wider range of OU courses and help solve some of the study problems which arose when prisoners move from one prison to another.<sup>215</sup> The Centre for Open Learning in Mathematics, Science, Computing and Technology (COLMSCT) project developed online aspects of courses for use in prisons, starting with the first-level mathematics module, M150. This project introduced a new wiki and forum for OU prison tutors and was trialled in a number of prisons. Similar developments to POLARIS were tried in Swedish prisons and then in HMP Swinfen Hall (West Midlands) and HMP Blundeston (East of England). None of these developments will mean that students in prison will be able to access teaching materials or ALs in the ways that other students can (for example the addresses and names of tutors are not provided to students in prison).

Sally Jordan pointed out, 'it is difficult for a Category A prisoner to set up an outdoor rain gauge and check the water level each day when he has to be handcuffed to a prison officer'.<sup>216</sup> At HMP Maghaberry, County Antrim, prisoners studying with the OU were allowed three days per week study time but this was not the case elsewhere.<sup>217</sup> One interviewee (Student 4) said that the prison officers 'are very resentful'. He was studying mathematics and claimed that when he was spotted writing algebra, 'they wanted to know why I was writing in code'. Student 36 offered an explanation as to the behaviour of some officers, 'they work hard – horrible hours – and they see you on a laptop getting a degree'.<sup>218</sup> Despite the attention given to overcoming the difficulties faced by learners in prisons, the disparities in resources offered to prisoners (when compared to other students) remain.

Although in 1974 Wakefield prison produced the first OU prisoner

graduate, Walter Perry pointed out in 1979 that ‘prisoners tend to have a relatively high rate of withdrawal from courses before the examinations ... Nevertheless, for those who actually sat the examinations, the results are reasonably good.’<sup>219</sup> By the new century things had changed. A study of retention between 2002 and 2008 found that a higher percentage of prisoners than other students completed modules. The percentage of those who complete a module is approximately the same for prisoners and non-prisoners.<sup>220</sup> Norman Woods, Regional Director of the East Midlands, recalled one of the results of these studies, the graduation ceremony in a local prison: ‘You used to put on your glad rags and go and hand them their diploma and certificate, whatever. And their families used to come in. You know, it was quite good. And the prison would provide some cakes and cup of tea.’<sup>221</sup>

There have been some high-profile prisoners. Myra Hindley has been called ‘the Open University’s most famous graduate’.<sup>222</sup> Even after her death in 2002 newspapers continued to link her to the OU.<sup>223</sup> John McVicar, sentenced to twenty-six years, took an Open University degree in Sociology and was awarded a BSc first class. He was paroled in 1978; his studies were perhaps important in helping him to leave criminal activity behind. Former addict and armed robber Graham Godden studied criminology and social sciences through the OU while in prison. On his release he worked with young people at risk of offending.<sup>224</sup> John Hirst, who won his case after he took the government to the European Court of Human Rights over voting rights for prisoners, spent thirty-five years in prison. While there he studied with the OU and claimed, ‘I was transformed from a law breaker into a law-maker’.<sup>225</sup> Erwin James Monahan went to prison with, in his own words, ‘massive failings to overcome’. He completed an OU degree, wrote a newspaper column while still a prisoner and, on his release, published a number of books and became a full-time freelance writer.<sup>226</sup> When Jason Warr went to prison he had a few low-grade GCSEs. On release, twelve years later, he had enough credits from Open University philosophy courses to get an unconditional offer for a degree place in the subject at the London School of Economics.<sup>227</sup> Bobby Cummines, now an OBE, said that ‘what changed my life was the OU’. After he left prison, he set up a charity, sat on the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act Review Management Advisory Group and worked with government ministers and civil servants on matters related to prison.<sup>228</sup>

In late 1960s there were about 600 people in prison in Northern Ireland. The outbreak of ‘the troubles’ resulted in a significant increase in the prison population. Internment without trial was introduced in 1971, and within four years 1,981 people had been interned.<sup>229</sup> Most were held in the Maze, a prison built at a former military air base, RAF Long Kesh. They wore their

own clothes, rather than prison uniforms, had free association and had some control over their own order, in that they maintained their own structures within the gaol, complete with Officers Commanding, who dealt directly with the prison authorities. They did not carry out prison work. In 1972 the British government assumed responsibility for security measures in Northern Ireland and trials for 'scheduled offences' (such as the illegal possession of firearms) started to take place in jury-less courts in front of a judge. By 1975 the prison population of Northern Ireland had quadrupled over five years.

In 1973 the OU's Regional Director, Gordon MacIntyre, visited Long Kesh Internment Centre. There he met the Officers Commanding of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Official Irish Republican Army, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association. Different communities, including the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Official Irish Republican Army, the Irish National Liberation Army and the Ulster Defence Association, had their own, almost self-contained, compounds. Although in some there were lectures given by prisoners, the leaders met by MacIntyre testified to the need for educational facilities. Soon afterwards arrangements were made for two prisoners from the Ulster Volunteer Force/Red Hand Commando, two from the Ulster Defence Association and two from the Official Irish Republican Army to study with the OU.<sup>230</sup> Ten men were designated 'serious students'. Initially they lived within different compounds. Most of those in prison in Northern Ireland came from Northern Ireland. They were less likely than prisoners in mainland UK to have their studies disrupted by being moved to other gaols. There were, however, additional difficulties for the OU's 'most isolated group of students' and their tutors.<sup>231</sup> Due to the restrictions imposed for security reasons, access to the site of 'the OU's oddest study centre', a study hut, was difficult. Eventually, most of the students were moved together. OU tutor-counsellor Diana Purcell, who had initially taught prisoners through a scheme established by a criminologist at Queen's University, Belfast, went on to teach OU students in the 'H' Blocks of the Maze Prison, Belfast.<sup>232</sup> She recalled that initially, as part of their protest, the prisoners associated with the Provisional Irish Republican Army 'wouldn't take part [in educational courses] because they were not co-operating in anything ... finally the Provisional IRA took a decision to join in'.<sup>233</sup> Those in the Compounds retained Special Category status until 1986. However, those sentenced after 1 May 1976 were placed in the 'H Blocks' and were not granted Special Category status. In response, there was a 'dirty protest' and a hunger strike by prisoners. Those who protested were not permitted to sit together or hold classes, so they shared information by shouting. This had a levelling effect among the prisoners. Eventually what was, in effect, political

status was granted with a variety of different paramilitary groups in charge of the H Blocks. One effect of this disruption was to undermine the convention that learning occurred when a teacher explained to a group. This method was replaced by greater debate, discussion and active learning.<sup>234</sup>

In 1979 there were ten OU students in the Compounds and seven in the H Blocks. After 1984 there were eighteen students in the Compounds and twenty-six in the H Blocks. In the H Blocks the number of OU students rose to forty-nine by 1986. The maximum number of students in the Compounds was twenty-one in 1985, including one who was a postgraduate. It was argued that in the prisons of Northern Ireland, between forty or fifty a year studied with the OU.<sup>235</sup> The first of a number of informal 'graduations' took place in the prison in April 1981; one of the graduates was a Republican and the other a Loyalist. Their parents, the prison governor, Diana Purcell and Gordon MacIntyre attended. There was an elaborate afternoon tea and then the Regional Director presented each graduate with a home-made scroll to commemorate the occasion, a few words were said and photographs were taken. By 1984 from among these prisoners there had been fifty-six passes, eighteen with distinction, and only one fail.<sup>236</sup> In 1986 seventeen former OU students who had been released from prison were in full-time university education, and there had been ninety-six OU degrees awarded to prisoners in Northern Ireland. The following year a further five students graduated, all from the Ulster Volunteer Force Compound. Many of the OU graduates went on to hold positions of authority in a variety of community organisations.<sup>237</sup> One study concluded that 'more prisoners enrolled in higher education at the Maze than at any other prison in the British system. Ten times more took university degrees.'<sup>238</sup>

Loyalists who studied in the H Blocks prison built at the Maze often took pride in studying from individual choice rather than as part of a group, while the Republicans developed their own education programme. Those who received OU teaching materials used these not only to learn for themselves but to teach other prisoners. Diana Purcell explained:

nearly all of them, but particularly the IRA, they set up the system [in the H Blocks]. If they arranged to do an OU course then they had to give a talk about what they were studying each week to the rest of the guys in that section ... they were extremely good students ... encouraged each other too, which was very good.<sup>239</sup>

There was interest in modules which drew on the work of Freire, notably *Education for adults*, E355. Laurence McKeown, who spent sixteen years in



the H Blocks, became interested in Friere's notions of non-hierarchical, dialogue-based, education.<sup>240</sup> He felt that his writing was 'absolutely brilliant'.<sup>241</sup> Another hunger striker, Jackie McMullan, felt 'exhilarated' by the idea of education as a revolutionary force, and Patrick Magee, who wrote a PhD while in prison, argued that 'there was an element of personal development in education in jail. You worked to be able to articulate better your political perspective and I saw education as a means to an end.'<sup>242</sup> McKeown recalled an example of peer learning. After some men had studied the OU's 30-point course *Changing experience of women* module, U221 (1983–91), a class of 'over 200 men took part in the women's studies class over a two-year period' supported by OU tutor Joanna McMinn. In common with other courses of the period, its design was influenced by the principles associated with Paolo Friere. The formation of self-help groups was encouraged, as was the view of staff as resources rather than pedagogues. The course team sought – argued one of its members, Gill Kirkup – to ensure that material was not abstract but could be tested against learners' experiences and that students 'value each other's experience and examine it supportively'.<sup>243</sup> Despite the atmosphere in the men-only Maze (Diana Purcell's first impression was of 'the maleness of it all'), McKeown felt that through the course 'men became aware of the power they held. Power they held over their female relatives and loved ones [and] over women in general.'<sup>244</sup> Gordon Macintyre, the tutor who assessed Laurence McKeown's double assignment, recalled that it was 'an essay full of feminist insights'.<sup>245</sup> A further study concluded of Republican prisoners that they were keen 'to move away from the hierarchical notions of knowing teacher and passive students' and that they felt that 'reading and studying in jail involved self-improvement overlaid with political commitment'.<sup>246</sup>

The violence within Northern Ireland had other impacts on the OU. Regional Director Gordon MacIntyre recalled how on one day he marked an assignment which had been written, 'with undeniable intelligence, sensitivity and wit', by a Republican in the Maze Prison and on the following day, due to a series of IRA bombs and hoaxes, his journey home took him three times longer than usual.<sup>247</sup> Although visits were time-consuming, due to the security checks, Gordon MacIntyre felt that it was a duty: 'we all saw the work as a professional responsibility, analogous with that of a doctor present at the scene of a terrorist incident, who would do his best to treat the injuries of the perpetrator as well as those of the victims'.<sup>248</sup> There was also an attempt to kill the Chancellor of the OU, 1973–78, and OU student, Gerald Gardiner. Selected to be Lord Chancellor by Harold Wilson in 1964, Gardiner retired from the post when Labour lost power in 1970. In 1972 he was appointed to investigate the alleged abuse of interrogation procedures in Northern Ireland.

His minority report condemned the use of ‘procedures which were secret, illegal, not morally justifiable’.<sup>249</sup> As chair of another committee on Northern Ireland in 1975 he approved the continuation of detention without trial. In 1981 the IRA attempted to kill Gardiner who, it argued, was responsible for the H Blocks and the criminalisation of the Republicans.<sup>250</sup>

One of the effects of the OU’s work in prisons was that cross-border links were strengthened. After some Republicans from Northern Ireland who were imprisoned in the Republic requested access to OU courses Diana Purcell helped to set up an arrangement to enable them to study.<sup>251</sup> The scheme grew to involve ‘about eight prisons’.<sup>252</sup> Staff tutor Rosemary Hamilton noted that, whereas prisoners and prison officers in the Republic became eligible to study through the OU, others in the Republic were not permitted to study with the OU,<sup>253</sup> and *The Times* reported this discrepancy.<sup>254</sup> In 1985, in addition to the ninety-eight OU students in prisons in the Maze, Armagh, Crumlin Road and Magillan, twenty-nine prisoners became OU students in Limerick, Portlaoise and Cork. While the OU claimed back from the British government the costs associated with the work of tutors who taught in prisons in Northern Ireland, the university did not receive payments from the Republic of Ireland.<sup>255</sup>

A number of those who became Republican political leaders took OU courses. In 2012 five Sinn Féin Assembly members, a Member of the European Parliament and others in a number of civic roles were OU graduates.<sup>256</sup> Peter Smith, who taught Sinn Féin Member of the Legislative Assembly Martina Anderson when she was a prisoner, said that it felt ‘surreal to be holding a politics tutorial with a member of the IRA, in the chapel of the prison’.<sup>257</sup> Some former prisoners felt that they owed their political and organisational skills to study with the OU. Diana Purcell argued that OU courses proved to be ‘amazingly successful’ within prisons, and pointed out that the prisoners were ‘part of our community and they’re going to come out ... and it’s important that they have some skills, this is particularly with the political ones’.<sup>258</sup> The effect of studying through the OU on those people who became active and useful citizens was mentioned by *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*:

The extraordinary role of Open University degrees in furthering the peace process in Northern Ireland is acknowledged throughout the Republican sector as well as by the smaller Loyalist political parties whose support for the Good Friday agreement of 1998 and for the 1999 Northern Ireland Executive is vital.<sup>259</sup>

Popular Unionist Party Assembly members, the late David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson were both Long Kesh Compound prisoners who completed OU

degrees.<sup>260</sup> They felt that their degrees gave them political confidence and an understanding of methods other than violence.<sup>261</sup> Both were elected to Belfast City Council in 1997 and to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998.

Based on their prior experiences of schooling many OU students, both inside and outside prison, start their OU studies with a sense of trepidation and alienation from formal education. Those who have succeeded often gained not only knowledge but the confidence and social and intellectual equipment which enabled them to cope better with, and sometimes take active roles in shaping, their communities and the wider society. A report by the OU's Offender Learning Steering Group in 2008 found that module completion rates for prison students were higher than for non-prison students and much higher than for students with disabilities or additional requirements or students in receipt of financial support.<sup>262</sup> Although the OU's role in prisons was not on the agenda during its creation, through its support for these developments the OU has strengthened civil society in ways which reflect its founders' ambitions.

## **Conclusion**

Encouraged by the Wilson government's Industrial Reorganisation Committee a new car company, the British Leyland Motor Corporation, was formed in 1968. Within a year it employed 250,000 people at the largest car plant in the world. The OU, opened in 1969, deployed some of the methods of mass production in order to provide the materials to train the 'technologists who perhaps left school at sixteen'. It was the reskilling of this constituency that Harold Wilson saw as central to the creation of a new Britain 'forged in the white heat of this revolution'.<sup>263</sup> Industrial production methods were applied to the creation and distribution of course materials to ensure that students received the thousands of OU learning resources that were posted out. Work tasks were fragmented, materials standardised and processes for assessment were made consistent across the country. The logic of manufacture for a mass market helped to sustain the vast size and scope of the OU. It was not only to be for technologists (indeed, it did not initially have a Faculty of Technology). Rather, the university was to bring together a range of learners including mature students, people with disabilities, women and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Over the decades the OU expanded its physical and human infrastructure – the necessary logistical operations, warehousing, tutors and study centres – but increasingly sought to combine its scale with a capacity to meet the specific needs of different categories of students. It helped to

shift education away from an emphasis on production and transmission as the best means of teaching and towards the notion of renewing cultural knowledge through thoughtful conversations. Many saw in the OU the possibility of going beyond creating an educated workforce and strengthening cross-class engagement in civil society. Former Labour Minister Richard Crossman cited the ‘housewives doing physics and a lorry driver deep in sociology’ to suggest that there was a ‘vast reservoir’ of working class intellectual ability going to waste which, once tapped, would lead to a ‘social explosion’.<sup>264</sup> Informed by this ethos the OU enabled many people from a wide range of backgrounds and previous experiences to build understandings together. Surveys of OU graduates between 1975 and 1989 indicate that over 70 per cent felt that they derived ‘great’ or ‘enormous’ benefit from their time as students, that over 80 per cent felt that it had had a good impact on them ‘as learners’ and ‘as a person’, and that more than 50 per cent noted the beneficial effect on their careers and on them as ‘members of society’.<sup>265</sup> Subsequently, OU students have credited their studies with helping in the development of their self-esteem, careers and familial relationships. Their accounts narrate dramatic changes to beliefs, thoughts and tastes. Many have concluded that their OU studies provided them with intellectual stimulation, pleasure in learning and what has been termed ‘cultural capital’.<sup>266</sup> Since the inception of the National Student Survey in 2005 the OU has consistently outscored almost every other university in the level of student satisfaction with the quality of its teaching.<sup>267</sup>

Numerous graduates have recognised the positive impact of university on their lives. However, for many OU students their studies dramatically changed their life trajectory. Pride in their achievements often came after a serious fall. Adult learners embarking upon distance education after a range of life experiences tend to hold distinctive culturally and contextually dependent conceptions of learning, seeing it as critical thinking and as personal development, rather than being simply about increasing one’s knowledge.<sup>268</sup> In addition to the possibility of personal redemption through education, the OU had an impact on the lives of those around the principal learners. For the state, families have long been a key formal means by which citizenship has been legally conferred. The OU built on that connection between identification with the nation and kinship by offering education which OU students could take into their homes and which could be built through communication within their networks. Even though the OU offered opportunities to those separated from their families because they were in prison or for other reasons, its bolstering of learning through collaboration helped to give communities new roles and strengths. Just as it is said that it takes a village to raise a child, many OU



**Figure 7.9** Some of them appearing both nervous and proud, OU students congregate at Ely Cathedral in order to receive their qualifications.

students recognised that completion of an OU degree was a shared experience achieved when students extended their networks and also drew upon and strengthened the communities they inhabited. Graduation for such OU students was not the marking of an apparently seamless, individual intellectual journey from school to degree but was the culmination of collective support and commitment from family, tutors, colleagues and friends. Students did not arrive at the OU assuming that a university education was a birthright determined by their class position, previous educational qualifications or age. The whoops and cheers that can be heard at any OU graduation ceremony give voice to the collective transformations that the OU has helped to shape (Figure 7.9).

### **Awards**

If heaven is indeed a place on earth, I'd put money on it being an Open University graduation ceremony. There's nothing quite so electrifying as watching families jump to their feet when mum, dad, or even great-gran takes to the stage. The years of juggled childcare, jobs and family finances melt away as the graduate beams down from the stage, amazed that their moment has come. And in the audience you see the cavalry: the proud

partner who poured endless cups of tea, the parents who babysat, the children who hugged mum the morning of her exams and almost made her cry when they said: ‘We love you whatever’. This is the stuff that makes The Open University great.<sup>269</sup>

The OU has travelled a long way since the time when it was a highly contested innovation. It has become an institution valued for its contributions to higher education, research and the wider societies that it serves. The university has adapted its focus, strategies and methods on the basis of its original values and ethos. Walter Perry felt that the OU could ‘change the face of education not only in Britain but in the world’.<sup>270</sup> In fulfilling that ambition, it has also become secure in the affections of the nation. At an individual level, because it inspired their thinking, strengthened their minds and connected them to learning communities, it has found a place in the hearts of over two million students. Harold Wilson introduced his idea of a ‘university of the air’ during a period when notions of Keynesian stability and prosperity dominated. In the years since the OU was conceived, education has come to be more commonly conceptualised less as a relationship and more as a product that can be bought in a globalised market. Many costs and responsibilities have shifted from the government to individuals. While the OU has played a role in these transformations and also felt their impacts, the broad vision outlined at its foundation by its first Chancellor, of being open to people, places, ideas and methods, has been maintained. The OU has been given many identities. It has been called Harold Wilson’s ‘pet scheme’ and is said to be marked with his ‘personal imprint’.<sup>271</sup> Wilson’s press secretary called it Wilson’s ‘monument’.<sup>272</sup> The description is an apt one if the reference is to the words written for Christopher Wren, *lector si monumentum requiris circumspice* (‘Reader, if you seek his monument – look around you’). By engaging with the passions and pleasures of learning, the OU’s two million plus learners have formed a wide range of fluid, emergent communities, have changed themselves, and have contributed to the transformations that we see all about us.